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Former CIA Director Turner: Panama Invasion 'A Mistake'

By BRYAN PFEIFFER

Times Argus Staff

NORTHFIELD — Admiral Stansfield Turner, former director of central intelligence, said the invasion of Panama was a mistake that undermines America's reputation abroad.

"We are going to pay a big price for this," he said during a stop in Northfield Thursday.

Turner engaged Norwich University cadets in a dialogue about ethics and tough decisions he personally made as a naval officer and later as CIA director under Jimmy Carter.

In an interview after the presentation, Turner discussed his own relations with deposed Panamanian leader Manuel Antonio Noriega as well as George Bush's invasion of the country.

Turner said Bush's action was unwarranted.

"I think we're just beginning to pay the price to improve his domestic policy image," he said.

After sending 24,000 American troops to the central American nation just before Christmas, Bush gave four reasons to justify the invasion. Turner disputed each of them.

First, Turner said the Panama Canal was not in danger, as the president had asserted.

Second, he said Bush's rhetoric about promoting democracy was weak considering the world has

more than 100 other undemocratic nations, many of which enjoy relations with the United States.

"If we're going to establish democracy...then we've got a big job on our hands," he said.

Third, Bush's claim of wanting to halt Noriega's alleged drug dealing did not warrant a full-scale invasion, he said.

"Twenty-four thousand troops to stop one drug smuggler is more than we normally employ," he said.

And finally, Turner said the president overreacted to the death of an American serviceman before the invasion. Although he called the shooting wrong, Turner said the serviceman was running from a Panamanian roadblock, which he called "unwise."

A former NATO commander in Southern Europe, Turner said the invasion now makes it difficult to criticize the Soviet Union for similar actions — such as sending troops into Azerbaijan.

And he said the military action has stirred passions of nationalism in Central America and assured a Sandanista victory in Nicaraguan elections later this month.

As for his own dealings with Noriega, Turner said, "We had no illusions that he was a God-fearing, honest citizen."

He said Jimmy Carter's CIA used Noriega as an intelligence

contact, but did not have him on the country's payroll.

"There is no question in my mind that when I knew of Noriega that he was doing illegal things," he said, calling the

former leader a "nefarious, unethical character."

But Turner said he had no knowledge of Noriega's ties to drug trafficking.

A former Rhodes scholar, Turner is now a professor of national security at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Turner addressed the Norwich corps of cadets as this week's President's Leadership Speaker.